

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-2

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Spitting on the Constitution

The official White House comment on a CIA counterterrorist campaign that allegedly got out of hand, killing more than 80 in a Beirut car bombing, is no comment.

"What is the responsibility of this administration to tell the truth on this subject?" UPI correspondent Helen Thomas asked presidential spokesman Larry Speakes yesterday.

"I just don't have any comment," Speakes replied. "That's a standard practice, and I don't have anything."

Secretary of State George P. Shultz, who was traveling in the Middle East when The Washington Post story about the tragedy was published, did a little masonry on the stonewall. He said he had not seen the Post story detailing the "unauthorized" car bombing of March 8 and added, "I do have a very strong view about terrorism, as is well-known."

Unidentified sources at the Central Intelligence Agency are saying that they were not to blame. They were, it seems, in the business of training counterterrorists, but their proxies apparently, without their knowledge, subcontracted the assassination of a militant Shiite leader, who escaped from the attack unharmed.

We can expect President Reagan, if he ever faces the news media, to invoke the ban on discussing intelligence matters, even on enterprises he has approved and notice of which he has given to the chairmen and vice chairmen of the congressional intelligence committees.

In other words, the carnage will be nobody's fault—except, of course, that of terrorists who provoked us into the unprecedented policy of spitting on the Constitution to engage in "preemptive strikes" against potential assassins.

For the moment, at least, the administration is too busy with damage control to consider the possible consequences to our Middle East policy. It can hardly be reassuring to residents of Lebanon that the United States

decided to add to the poison of religious hatreds and factional feuds by training and directing teams that sound vividly like the "hit squads" of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, reports of which sent the administration into spasms of outrage and security measures.

Some reverberations may also be felt in our Nicaraguan policy. At a minimum, the idea of putting the CIA in charge of "humanitarian aid" for the contras, as the Senate voted to do last month, may die a quiet death. The political judgment of the agency, its failure to control and command its "resources," may revive questions such

as those that accompanied revelations of the CIA-sponsored mining of Nicaragua's harbors.

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) and Rep. Don Edwards (D-Calif.) propose congressional investigations.

The witnesses should include the president, the secretary of state and the director of the CIA, all of whom seem to think that if they keep quiet about their squalid secret it will go away.

The one encouraging aspect of the matter is that training proxies to do unto others what others might be planning to do unto them was hastily killed when the full horrors of the March 8 "runaway" operation were known. Those who had been shouting that we must not become the "Hamlet of nations," in Shultz's words, knew at once that they should have known what would happen when they underwrote violence in a violent area.

At the moment of his first inauguration, Reagan vowed that terrorists should know that the days of wine and roses were over for them. With Jimmy Carter, pale and exhausted from his long vigil on the release of the Iranians' hostages, by his side, Reagan warned that terrorists would pay for their crimes during his administration.

But even the terrorist bombing of the Marine headquarters in Beirut in October 1983 brought no visible reprisals. Last October, however, the secretary of state made a startling

speech in a Park Avenue synagogue. He exhorted Americans to accept "preemptive strikes," even on "evidence" that might not stand up in a U.S. court.

What we know now is that Shultz, who often acts as the president's bullhorn, magnifying and embellishing Reagan impulses—even to the point of comparing Nicaragua to Nazi Germany—was talking about a program that was probably already in operation.

The administration is much incensed when unpatriotic Americans compare the United States to its adversaries. The State Department recently financed a seminar to condemn the unacceptable doctrine of "moral equivalence," which rests on the premise that despicable things are just as despicable when done by us as when done by the Soviets.

We will now see how they manage the problem of "moral equivalence" as it applies to a counterterrorist program that blew up in their faces. Claiming purity of heart when you are becoming like those you most loathe is as difficult as declaring that you didn't know what your hirelings were up to. "No comment" may not be sufficient.